



When global problems come home: Engagement with climate change within the intersecting affective spaces of parenting and activism

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ABSTRACT

Emotional engagement with climate change has been identified as an important research agenda. Recent studies have suggested parental worry for children and future generations are motives for climate activism, highlighting both personal and social justice concerns. A global parent-led climate justice movement specifically articulating this has emerged, yet currently remains under-researched. At the same time, social movement research has tended to overlook the social embeddedness of activism. To address these gaps in knowledge, this study used a qualitative mix of diary entries and interviews of UK-based mothers and fathers to investigate the overlapping emotional spaces of climate activism and parenting. It found that a parental lens on climate, informed by dystopian imaginings and processes of responsabilisation amplified fear and risk-related feelings, but were managed by channelling energy into a diverse array of collective action spaces. This led to positive emotions of hope and solidarity which were fostered and circulated within close personal relationships. In addition, the study found times and spaces which put a strain on affective engagement, and on partner relationships. The paper discusses the lack of moral anger in this sample of climate activists compared to previous research, and calls for further enquiry into the movement's development of intergenerational justice grievances.

1. INTRODUCTION

Climate change is one of the most pressing issues of our time for the sustainability of human and natural systems. Grassroots movements play an important role in raising public awareness and concern and in generating political pressure to effect change (Meyer, 2007). The recently emerged justice claims mobilised by the global youth climate movement have drawn attention to the need for an orientation which goes beyond governments' short-termism in climate policymaking and the "future blindness" in public engagement with climate change (Lorenzoni et al., 2007, p. 452; (Luna and Mearman, 2020).

The youth climate movement is part of an increasing diversification of environmentalism (Rootes and Saunders, 2005), promoting the interests of marginalised people and returning environmental justice to an issue of 'where we live, work and play' (Agyeman et al., 2016, p. 336). The parent-led intergenerational justice movement has received less attention. Grassroots organisations such as Parents 4 Future and Extinction Rebellion Families have coalesced around the goals of preventing the ecological destruction which threatens the future of their children, and effecting systems change (Parents for Future: About Us, 2021). Despite its global reach, this movement has been described somewhat insignificantly as youth movement 'spin-offs', or 'solidarity groups' (see de Moor et al., 2021).

Understanding how and why people engage with climate change is crucial for understanding processes of social change (Ockwell and

Whitmarsh, 2009). Recent empirical studies by Wang and colleagues (2018), and Martiskainen and colleagues (2020) found that concern for, and a sense of responsibility towards, children and future generations, are important motives for climate protest attendance, signifying an affective pathway into climate activism (Roser-Renouf and Maibach, 2014). Parents as a diverse public offer insight for understanding 'bottom up' pathways to policy change acceptance (Whitmarsh et al., 2013). Despite this, little is known about what role parenthood plays in politicised responses to risk and uncertainty. This paper addresses this gap. I first outline previous research on the intersections of parent activism, everyday life and emotions. I then set out the methods used to investigate UK-based parent-led climate activism and present and discuss the findings.

1.1. Previous parent-led activism

Parenthood was a pivotal identity in the US environmental justice movement. The mobilisation of families concerned about exposure to toxic waste was predominately led by women from marginalised black and low income communities (Brown and Ferguson, 1995). The movement's rhetoric used righteous anger to confront the breach of their human rights by those in power (Capek, 1993). This social justice frame went on to shift public understanding of the issue and changed policy-making around the siting of toxic waste (Capek, 1993). Studies on parent campaigning on other social justice issues have shown similar successes

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(Weed, 1990; Leiter, 2004; Panitch, 2012; Katz, 2017).

1.2. Emotional responses to climate change

Emotions are important in social responses to climate change, determining the way information is acquired, understood, and shared (Roeser, 2012; Davidson, 2018). Climate change can evoke emotions such as anxiety and grief (Head, 2016), which may lead to denial and apathy (Norgaard, 2006) or emotional suppression to fit with contextual emotion norms (Head and Harada, 2017). Anger can be a powerful mobiliser of climate action (Nabi, 2002; Stanley et al., 2021), often reshaped into hope and solidarity (Roser-Renouf and Maibach, 2014) through a shared identity and issue framing (Melucci, 1985). The interaction between negative and positive emotions – termed the moral battery by Jasper (1998) – is a core dynamic of social movements, often capitalised on to create emotional energy (Jasper, 2012). The moral battery is shaped by power relations and sociopolitical context: Kleres and Wettergren (2017) found that global north activists held a fear/hope dynamic but downplayed their anger, while global south activists felt less hope and more fear and anger. In contrast, Curnow and Veal's (2020) study of global north student activists found that anger was an expressed emotion that reflected disempowerment, and helped recruit new members.

The study of emotions in social movements has paid little attention to the everyday of activist life which might interplay with group emotions (Simpson, 2015). One exception is McComiskey's (2001) study of peace activism, which explored the blurring of boundaries between parenting and campaigning, and political action driven by the merging of collective emotions and ideology.

Parent-led social justice activism has given insight into the social contextual origins of emotions that motivate and sustain social movements. Leiter (2004) and Weed (1990) showed how activists draw on their parent identity to mobilise fear, anger and frustration and effect social change. These studies demonstrate that emotional dynamics of activism are not shut off from everyday life. But for a deeper level understanding of the moral underpinnings of political action (Jasper, 2012) we need to consider how the micro-level of interactions with partners, children, relatives and friends that may amplify or diminish emotions recirculated within activist spaces. This paper will explore the overlapping emotional spaces of climate activism and parenting in the UK. By understanding parents' emotional engagement with the issue, this paper contributes to knowledge on identity-driven forms of engagement, and how action is micro-mobilised within personal life (Valocchi, 2012). More broadly, it contributes to knowledge on an emerging discourse of climate justice which is consequential for 'just sustainabilities' within global north geographies (Agyeman et al., 2016).

1.3. Theoretical framework

In this paper I use a sociocultural perspective of emotions as "embodied meaning-making" (Lupton, 2013, p. 637) in combination with Sara Ahmed's (2004) concept of affective spaces, to analyse parents' engagement with climate change activism and the everyday social spaces which sustain it. According to Ahmed, emotions often have a cultural politics which are discursively deployed to gain affective intensity and value; they may 'stick' to objects and join people together. Ahmed sees emotions as culturally shaped and shaping, along axes of social sameness and identity. I apply Ahmed's thinking to the parent activism in this study to make visible a symbolic boundary between the 'we' of worried parents taking action and the 'other' of non-activists. Climate affect can be circulated within and between the social spaces of, for example, the family home, the street protest or the workplace, and may be situationally maintained, amplified or attenuated.

2. Methods

The data presented here are from a PhD study of the experiences of UK-based mothers and fathers mobilising to address climate change. Data were collected between June 2020 and January 2021. This period coincided with the onset of the coronavirus pandemic and restrictions on mobility, necessitating a use of social media and snowballing for recruitment. A purposive sampling strategy was used, inviting parents/guardians based in the UK who considered themselves worried about climate change and its impacts on their children's future, and who were involved in any kind of climate change campaigning. Participants were offered a £25 donation to a charity of their choice as a thank you. 12 mothers (including one stepmother), and 8 fathers were recruited before additional 'lockdowns' stemmed further interest in participation.

A mix of in-depth interviews and a diary study were used to explore the thoughts, feeling and actions relating to climate change in the course of quotidian family life. Diary studies are helpful to record those more fleeting and mundane moments which may be difficult to recall in an interview setting (Bartlett and Milligan, 2015). Videocall interviews lasted 45–120 min. Interview questions were structured around the main themes of the PhD, including motivations and routes into activism, and relationships with friends and family.

2.1. Participant details

Participants were mainly middle class, possessing a tertiary level education and a medium to high household income. All but one participant were White. The social class and ethnicity of this sample reflected the wider UK climate movement (Saunders et al., 2020; Bell and Bevan, 2021). My wish was to attract a more diverse interest, but the coronavirus restrictions ruled out a more targeted approach.

3. FINDINGS

3.1. Being a 'normal parent', avoiding an activist identity

Table 1 illustrates the diversity of grassroots climate activism in this sample. Activism spaces tended to align with participants' interests, skills and experience, and social networks. This meant that the parent movement was diffuse and often subsumed within broader climate activism. The unifying goal of justice for children was evident in participants' narratives.

As I have outlined in an earlier output of this project (Howard et al., 2021), many participants in this study chose to disassociate themselves from an activist identity, preferring to self-identify as "normal" parents with "normal everyday concerns". I have argued that the parent identity is used as a bridge to the public and to politicians to avoid the stigmatising effect of the environmentalist identity.

All participants practiced their politics and activism within their family lives, raising children to be engaged with the natural world, to foster a "keen sense of morality" and "consciously think about the impact they are having on the planet". The politics of inequality and climate justice were regularly discussed within the home, and where children were considered old enough, they were encouraged to accompany their parents on climate protests.

3.2. Coming to activism: the moral shock

Participants foregrounded fear and alarm in their reasons for mobilising. Dystopian imaginations of the future climate-changed world were a common emotional backdrop. Evident in the diary exercise was also everyday grief and a sense of loss from witnessing the decline and death of local wildlife. But there was a particular parental lens which amplified risk and shaped generalised ecological grief into visions of food insecurity, increased social conflict and political volatility. Participants described feeling terrified and desperate, future-orientated feelings

Table 1
Participant details.

Pseudonym and parental details	Current spaces of activism
Peter, 30s, two children age 1 and 5	Eco parent group; blogging; lobbying MPs; local campaigns; workplace activism
Freya, 20s, expecting first child	Education; eco parent groups
Lena, 30s, one child age 1	Blogging; eco parent groups
Sophia, 30s, one child age 2	Education change; Extinction Rebellion
Cassie, 30s, two children age 3 and 6	Extinction Rebellion
Helen, 40s, one child age 17	Direct actions; Permaculture; Women's Environmental Network
Leah, 30s, two children age 13 and 14	Direct actions; Transition Town
Fran, 30s, partner of Leah	Extinction Rebellion
Melanie, 20s, one child age 2	Eco parent group
Ryan, 30s, two children age 3 and 5	Education change
Charlotte, 30s, 4 children, age 2 to 8	Workplace sustainability; Extinction Rebellion
Marc, 50s, one child age 16	Extinction Rebellion
Ruben, 50s, two children age 6 and 8	Local climate action group
Alexander, 30s, one child age 13	Art activism
Megan, 40s, one child age 5	Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth; Transition Town
Patricia, 30s, three children aged 2, 7 and 9	Eco parent group
Tim, 50s, two grown up children age 20s	Extinction Rebellion
Rick, 40s, three children age 14, 12 and 8	Workplace eco education; Extinction Rebellion
Dee, 40s, two children age 6 and 3	Parent eco club
Marius, 30s, one child age 4	Eco social enterprise

which they distinguished from “social outrage” for people already being affected by climate change in poorer communities. These risk-related emotions were powerful in overcoming feelings of paralysis, evident in one father’s narrative of his activism: “regardless of my element of hope, it feels like my moral duty as a parent to do it now”.

Although the majority of participants reported being aware of environmental issues and making efforts to consume responsibly for some time before their campaigning efforts began, eight participants recalled specific points in time when a connection was made between the future climate-challenged world and their role as a responsible parent, often described metaphorically as ‘switches’ which focussed their thinking and action around “the world I want my children to grow up in.” For three of these participants, such moments came with the arrival of a new baby, described as a sense of guilt resulting from tension between the caring spaces of parenting and protection of the environment. Rick described this as “a really important moment” in particular because the expression of his environmental politics violated the emotion norms of the time around childbirth: “When my first daughter was born I said to my mother-in-law, it would be irresponsible to have any more children because of global warming”, even though he felt “aware that it was a really unacceptable thing to say at the time”. Similarly, Charlotte’s child’s birth brought on guilt around car use:

“I remember suddenly becoming really anxious about driving a lot, and that being a bad thing. You suddenly see it for what it is, that everything I did, and we all did, and all the choices we make, are going to cause problems or be solutions”.

Seven of the participants described the high-profile climate-related political events around 2018 and 2019 as catalysing moments of emotional reflexivity and paths into activism, meaning-making moments that Jasper (2011) might call a moral shock. Charlotte described how the arrival of her 4th child coincided with the publication of the

2018 IPCC Report; what Ahmed (2004) might call an ‘object’ from which flowed “terror” and guilt into the parenting space of “bringing another person into this world”. Other objects acted as an alarm bell such as the popular book *Uninhabitable Earth* by David Wallace-Wells. Several participants cited this as holding great affective capital in driving their path into activism. Sophia explained her feeling after reading it:

“I felt absolutely shock, and panic and all the things Extinction Rebellion said it would be. It was like grief. It was a really powerful switch, and I switched from being completely naive to kind of being awake to it”.

Sophia’s crisis narrative connected the globalised spaces of climate change to her personal family spaces: “It’s not confined to a situation where it’s happening in a far-flung corner of the world which is easier to ignore. It’s going to impact everybody and everything you know”. For Sophia, concerns about “societal breakdown, lots of death across the world, large parts of land underwater” was a scenario impossible to ignore. The Wallace-Wells text was also a “massive shock” for Cassie, who added:

“My first reaction to all of that was just fear, fear for my kids. The first thing I thought when they said 12 years was - do the maths and I just thought, they’re not even going to be adults by then! “

Part of the power of these moments to move parents into action related to a reading of Ahmed’s (2004) ‘relationships of difference’. The fear was starkly different from their previous sense of ontological security and was thus able to ‘stick’ more readily. Like many of the newer activists, Patricia had not felt worried about climate change until a point in 2018 when the direct actions of Extinction Rebellion served as an epiphany, which was amplified within the space of family life when her young children would come home from school and ask her existential questions about living on an overheating planet.

Marius said he felt accountability to his son and the future of the planet on multiple levels. His sense of responsibility was intimately connected to guilt around his own ecological culpability, which was evident in a heartfelt poem he’d written for his son, as if by his son. Too long to include here, the poem spoke of his dad Marius being “part of a society that was all wrong”, and “You did your bit but you weren’t that strong [...] You’re not a bad person but you were partly at fault”.

For these parents, biography, accumulation of memories, and understandings of chronological time as a causal chain constituted the temporality of living with and responding to climate change (Smart, 2007). In this way the past and future weighed upon the present: shame and guilt of historical high consumption practices intensified expectations of climate hazards, evoking a moral narrative of the need for good parenting to create a desirable pathway for children as they journey into adulthood (Cassidy and Lone, 2020). This responsibilised, anticipatory subjectivity articulates a late capitalist Western world temporality in which time is linear, and in which intergenerational justice equates with one generation blameable for harming the next (Nairn et al., 2021; Šubrt, 2021). Within this Cartesian technoscientific frame of time, climate change is quantifiable and is believed to be controllable by reducing global carbon emissions, a notion reflexively engaged with through linking personal actions with planetary issues (Beck, 1992; Adam, 1996).

It is important to add that not all parents viewed climate change with such dystopian affective intensity. Alluding to what Hochschild (1979) might identify as the influence of ‘feeling rules’, Dee confessed:

“I wouldn’t say I’m driven particularly about her (daughter) future [...] actually I’m almost going out of my way to make sure I read stuff to make myself more concerned about the climate crisis [...] and to really feel how important it is and how it really will impact my children’s future, and my grandchildren’s future. And I feel like I need to do more learning, because I still don’t feel it, if I’m honest”.

Dee had earlier told me how other mothers could often be judgemental of parenting styles, which suggests that group processes of emotion normativity made her feel guilty for not feeling fear for her children's future. Her allusion to the interplay between the objects of climate change texts, environmental discourses and the people and spaces of her activist circles gives some insight into the genesis and flow of the affective intensities around climate change.

3.3. Suppressed anger

Despite the awareness of inadequate government and societal responses to the injustice of climate change for children, there was little anger expressed by parents in the interviews or diary studies. Where it arose, anger was reflected upon and suppressed. This was notable because it contradicted the already-discussed literature on anger as both a personal motive in politicised parenthood, and as a collectivised affect that helped publicly frame an issue as one of injustice (e.g. [Capek, 1993](#); [Brown and Ferguson, 1995](#); [Weed, 1990](#)). Participant Megan had documented in her diary feelings of anger about supermarkets' livestock processing practices but dismissed her own righteousness by reflecting – with expressed guilt – on her non-vegan diet. Anger was again tempered by guilt by Peter, this time for compromising his 'good' fatherhood, telling me he'd got frustrated about recent government inaction, but added "it's really hard to be a good dad when you're angry about things. And so you draw that line between, don't bring it in the house!" Similarly, two other parents told me of trying to hide their feelings at home when frustration surfaced regarding couples' difference in levels of engagement with climate change.

Marc wrote in his diary that he is "mostly able to cruise along, not getting too angry/frustrated about the suicidal path we're on and the lack of action", and when I pressed him on this in the interview, he admitted feeling 'frustrated' when other parents do not get involved but once again, referring to guilt, said:

"I feel I have to just let go of that, because I was in a position of doing nothing myself, and I must have been frustrating to all those other people who've been trying to do something for so long. And it's not helpful!"

Marc then added "I don't think you win round many people that way, I think we learn from watching other people panic". Witnessing others panic had also been mentioned by activists Sophia and Cassie, as they recalled their first forays into activist cultural spaces that painted a bleak scenario of the near-future unless there was radical political and economic change. The rhetorical use of apocalyptic framing has become increasingly mainstream in contemporary climate activism ([Cassegard and Thorn, 2018](#)). In this vein, Marc's 'letting go' of 'unhelpful' anger served two roles: first, it assuaged his sense of guilt for having come to activism only recently; and second, Marc felt that performing the socially contagious emotion of panic was more valuable than expressing anger or frustration for connecting with an apathetic wider public.

3.4. The emotional battery: hope and solidarity as an opposing force

I have described the way that risk and moral emotions have brought about engagement with climate change, moments involving negative emotions of fear, guilt and frustration. This poses the question of how such negative affect was transformed into a mobilising energy. Using [Jasper's \(1998\)](#) concept of the moral emotional battery, the diary and interview data revealed that various climate activist spaces fostered an opposing positive 'charge' of empowerment, hope and solidarity. These affective spaces served to counter the potential for negative emotions to paralyse and impede social action. Charlotte's quote demonstrates this with her metaphor of moving her body and mind into the affective space of activism:

"I have found that throwing myself into all of this actually really does help. Because you're doing something about it. And so, I think when I'm anxious, I'm having those pangs of grief and anxiety a bit less".

Similarly, Melanie illustrates the transformative ability of activism to turn worry into empowerment:

"This worry is quite a big thing in our society, but that's maybe linked into not necessarily feeling like we can take action so easily, feeling more frustrated [...]. We can get on and take action, and then it becomes powerful".

The online sphere featured frequently within everyday activist life, in part due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the necessities of remote communication. Engaging with the online space enabled participants to proactively absorb or evade affective intensities around climate issues. Freya often sought out happier stories to counter relentless bad news. From this diary entry her sense of hope is explicit:

"Saw an online screening of 2040 and found it painted a very hopeful future. It seems that many solutions that could support a green recovery are already in place, we just need the leadership to take us in that direction [...]. There is hope for a brighter future where we start to reverse the negative impact we've had on the world, so let's do it!"

Influencing others was a common source of hope and positive affect, including the spaces of family and friendship. Parenting was frequently featured in the diary study as a space of pride and hope when the ecological practices parents fostered at home were embodied in their children's engagement with the natural world, demonstrated in Megan's diary:

"Walking with my daughter to school though the countryside, morning:

We chat about how it is a lovely morning and the landscape is beautiful and I'm so proud of her for finding beauty in the slightest things and showing kindness to everything, no matter how small - her bike screeched to a halt so she could pick up a tiny snail and put it on the grass. Feel thankful there are children like her in the world who will make everything better [...]"

The workplace could be an unexpected affective space for activists when colleagues enthusiastically shared what they had learnt from the influence of activists' practices. Charlotte told me she was "so pleased" with the outcome of her efforts to influence:

"I came back from on maternity leave and so many people were proud to tell me they'd changed practices or been talking to people about the environment. So those little things, the little effects you can have without really trying!"

3.5. Affective spaces of solidarity

Interactions with fellow activists were a crucial source of communal, supportive feelings to counter uncomfortable emotions of fear and frustration, often resulting in feelings of affection. These interactions were found to occupy both the online and in-person activist spaces. Cassie's diary described her pride and feeling of inspiration when seeing her sister deliver a rallying speech for Extinction Rebellion. Affective interactions with fellow activists brought positive emotions, as Marc's diary documented:

"Checking photos of the day and tweeting about our action I feel a surge of affection and appreciation for the friends I've made through XR. Also, a sense of achievement at having done something (however ineffectual) rather than nothing".

I was told by the majority of participants that the need for shared time and space with activists was driven by a frustration with everyday public silences around climate change, as well as life at home making

them 'feel alone' when their family and friends did not share their fear and anxiety about the future. In our discussion, Charlotte explained how this isolation was apparent against the contrasting affective engagement expressed by fellow activists:

"So a really frustrated feeling, and I felt very alone in that. But actually, the first time that I didn't feel alone in that was when XR started last year. That's the first time I was like ah! Finally someone is talking about it!"

With this in mind, I asked other participants whether they were able to turn to their partner for emotional support. Cassie answered:

"No, not about the climate. I compartmentalise that bit of me, and I really lean on my activist friends, because they get it. And my husband [...] doesn't deal with emotions the same. So if I felt really upset about something in my family, I would absolutely turn to him and he would be there for me, and he would make me feel better. But when I read the Committee on Climate Change thing, I turned to my activist channels, because I want other people to be like 'fuck, this is really bad!' [...] It's about letting yourself breathe, and coming together to recognise how difficult all these feelings are to handle".

Cassie's narrative illustrates the way that emotion is supported in different ways according to the affective space in which it circulates. Shocking news required an emotional culture of solidarity and connection, an affective intensity inadequately supported within the spousal relationship. In contrast, the public activism space could foster an affective intensity and connection with strangers, evident in Rick's account of his encounter with a mother at a street protest:

"She told me she was there on her own [...], she was the one in her family that it mattered enough to. And she told herself, well it's better if my husband, if one of us is holding it together! But on the other hand, as we were talking we were both expressing this feeling of kind of, limited support and a sense of isolation as well. And it was a really cathartic conversation, in which I recognised that she experienced a similar sense that this issue was causing a kind of difference, or distance within her family relationships".

Ryan talked in a similar way about an emotional moment at a protest event when he reflected on the shared feelings and solidarity formed against a backdrop of public silence that often made him feel he was 'crazy':

"On one of the first Extinction Rebellion protests I went along with my daughter [...] and thinking, look at all these people who feel the same as me! And that was quite an emotional point, and I felt actually, I'm not some sort of crazy person who is isolated and on his own! There are actually lots of people! And that's something I found through all the groups that I've participated in, the more valuable thing has almost been building relationships with other people".

Ahmed's (2004) idea of affective value was identifiable as Ryan went on to tell me that the formation of valued friendships was a selling point that he used in recruiting new group members.

3.6. Spaces of emotional disengagement

Participants reported that climate action took up most of their spare time and imbued every moment of their daily lives. The emotional charge of activism was at times exhausting and required various strategies to "make headspace". When affect was not usefully circulating within social interactional spaces, it was relatively easy to disengage from, albeit with some reticence. For example when reading social media newsfeeds, many reported they guiltily scrolled past bad news stories, or avoided watching any upsetting nature documentaries because they "needed a break".

Sometimes disengaging temporarily from some activist spaces was a strategy to emotionally recharge before the next high-risk protest, as

Marc's diary documented:

"Decided not to attend another XR meeting about tomorrow's march to Parliament sq. Need some headspace prior to week of rebellion. Feeling slightly anxious wondering how we will be received by the police and how it will all go".

Despite many reporting feeling emotionally isolated at home, sometimes the humdrum of quotidian family life served to mollify the emotional demands of activism and worry about the future. In order to function parents would "sometimes let the anxiety wash over a little bit". Rick told me:

"It's [climate change] terrifying of course, but it's part of this contradiction that we live with, isn't it? I get up, I do these things, I make coffee, I carry on life".

Similarly, Cassie explained how managing emotions was necessary for family life, particularly in the context of competing parental responsibilities:

"You've still got to live day to day. At the moment I'm managing my own emotions in relation to the climate, I'm managing my own emotions in relation to lockdown, and I'm fully responsible for managing my kids' emotions about not being at school, and being at home together. And that's draining!"

Cassie's narrative exemplifies the complex ways that climate-related affectivity is negotiated within daily family life. The ability of climate affective intensity to 'stick' (Ahmed, 2004) depends not just on the individual body and relations of difference with which it comes into contact, but also the context of competing affective subspaces and temporalities. In contrast to the perceived linear timeframe of the climate crisis, the need to suspend climate worry in order to "function" day-to-day demonstrates the re-productive temporality of day-to-day family life: one of relational practices, rhythm and routine, and adjusting to situational requirements in material and affective ways (Elder, 1994; Holmes, 2010; Morgan, 2011).

4. DISCUSSION

This paper has explored the emotional engagement and affective practices of members of the under researched parent-led intergenerational climate justice movement. In doing so, it uncovers the micro-level processes that effect politicised behavioural change. In recognition that the collective emotions of social movements are not shut off from everyday life, it pays particular attention to the overlapping affective spaces of activism and personal life. Using Ahmed's (2004) concept of the movement of affect through and between bodies and objects, it explores the interactional spaces within and between which affective intensity may arise and become amplified, accumulated, attenuated and transformed. In this way, it also improves understanding of how emotions relating to parenthood and personal life may motivate, sustain or impede political collective action.

The study found narratives of fear, grief and dystopian imaginaries in parents' interviews and diary entries, reflecting apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic emotion cultures found more widely in the climate movement (Cassegard and Thorn, 2018; Kleres and Wettergren, 2017). Ahmed's (2004) conceptualisation of fear involves anticipation of harm from a proximal object, which she argued is distinct from the less focussed emotion of anxiety. Using this reading, the object of imagined negative future material conditions and the absence of adequate governance to prevent them, weighs upon the present for the parents in this study. Ahmed argues that the power of fear to move people is the potential to pass the object of fear, in a way that less focussed anxiety cannot. For participants, the possibility of passing this object of fear came about through taking collective action to confront it, reflecting a Western cultural construction of time and climate change temporality as one of past, present and future, and with it, modernist expectations of

progress and assumptions that humanity can reverse the harms of industrialisation (Adam, 1996; Nairn et al., 2021; Šubrt, 2021). As Nairn and colleagues (2021) have discussed, this technoscientific view of the future is not universal. Indigenous and traditional epistemologies understand the natural world and generational environmental stewardship in terms of overlapping timeframes and non-linear temporalities, within which ecological harm and the interconnected complexities of climate change may be non-reversible and subject to unknowable futures (Salick and Byg, 2007; Wildcat, 2009; Hatfield et al., 2018).

Parents' fear was amplified to a level of alarm and existential terror when viewed through a reflexive risk lens of parenthood and circulated within parental discourse. This climate risk was often catalysed at significant moments such as the arrival of a new baby, or when young children asked direct questions about the climate. Recent high profile scientific publications and media coverage of activists served as 'wake up moments', moral shocks that were intimately tied to guilt at their own historically high consumption and lack of political action. A sense of moral obligation suggested an internalised micropolitics of 'actionable responsibility' (Eden, 1993) as well as hallmarks of some environmentalist discourse which repudiates human reproduction (Lappé et al., 2019; Schneider-Mayerson, 2022). It is important to consider that pre-existing environmental values are likely to have preceded the moral shock described in these findings. Moral shocks tend to activate underlying values, and the process tends to be part of a more gradual flow of towards political action (Jasper, 2011).

Despite the injustices that climate change will bring for their children, parents' individualised guilty consciences usurped moral anger that might arise from a sense of intergenerational injustice. This contrasts with previous research on environmental social justice activism (e.g. Capek, 1993; Curnow and Veal, 2020; Stanley et al., 2021), as well as on parent-led justice activism (e.g. Katz, 2017; Leiter, 2004; Panitch, 2012; Weed, 1990) which have found that moral outrage at a sense of injustice can be a strong personal motivator as well as a collectively interpreted and constructed issue frame (Johnston and Klandermans, 1995; McAdam, 2017). In this study anger was suppressed and 'let go of' in the belief that it was inappropriate at home and ineffective in the public realm. Collective action frames are collectively-held beliefs and meanings that legitimate social movement activities (Gamson, 1995). Parents preferred to accumulate and deploy a panic frame, which was seen as holding more affective value in mobilising the public. This finding suggests a more nuanced view of anger is required, illustrating that moral anger and outrage can be subject to relational mediators. It is also important to highlight social backgrounds when comparing activists' emotions: the low income and racially oppressed groups which constituted the justice movements in many of the previous studies contrast with the white, middle class and relatively privileged biographies of those in this study. Privilege was a factor in the findings by Kleres and Wettergren (2017), where activists living in countries that have historically contributed more to greenhouse gas emissions expressed fear and guilt, but the expression of anger was more often rejected in the belief that this would blame and alienate the general public. The findings of this study are consistent with this insight, but also add to it by suggesting that anger is additionally managed to protect personal life spaces that overlap with activism – for example, to fit within ideologies and identities of being a 'good' parent and intimate partner.

Undeterred by a weight of painful emotions that could potentially paralyse, parents transferred (but not transformed) fear and guilt into a mobilising force. This was done by drawing on social and educational capital in the form of supportive partner relationships, strong social connections and professional skills to create or move into a diverse and innovative array of activist spaces. Using Jasper's (1998) analytical concept of the moral battery of emotions, the toll of fear and grief was balanced by fostering hope and solidarity within particular affective spaces. This is not to confuse hope with optimism (Cassegard and Thorn, 2018), as parents knew of the current climate tragedies already

unfolding across the globe. Hope is an emotion said to be evoked by a sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) but importantly, it is brought about socially within the affective practices of everyday life and is preceded by struggle (Anderson, 2006; Kraftl, 2008). Drawing on this idea to add to research on the cultivation of hope within climate movements (North, 2011; McAdam, 2017; de Moor et al., 2020), this study found that everyday, momentary hopefulness was nurtured and co-constructed within personal life spaces such as ecologically-oriented activities with children, or with friends, colleagues and siblings who had been influenced to take their own forms of climate-related action.

Closely related to hope in this context, solidarity with an emotional community was an important source of empowering social scaffolding (McGeer, 2004) which accumulated an affective value and sustained movement participation (Ahmed, 2004). The majority of parents in this sample were the only activist in their family and consequentially felt emotionally isolated; however support was found through emotional connections with other activists. This also created a collective identity of us who 'get' climate change. Participants were resigned to their partner not expressing the same level of fear about the future climate-changed world for their children, which supports arguments by Jamieson (1999) that the realities of intimate coupledom are multi-dimensional and often pragmatic, in contrast to ideas of the emotionally self-disclosing relationship.

While the findings of emotional engagement with climate change in this study suggest a good deal of agency in risk selection and the mobilising of concerns, there was evidence that even individuals who are passionately dedicated to activism are subject to structural constraints. The affective intensity of activism was often incompatible with some of the times and spaces of 'doing' family and its competing practical and emotional demands (Daly, 2003). In this sense, parenting served as a structuring effect to constrain engagement with climate change, necessitating the compartmentalising of climate-related worries. Other structures influencing emotional management may be the feeling rules (Hochschild, 1979) of family life, cultural codes "that are passed through the generations and that influence whether, how, or when family members can express anger, joy, or sadness" (Daly, 2003, p. 775). Overall, the temporalities and messiness of family-climate change intersections found in this study support arguments by Anne Phoenix and colleagues (Phoenix et al., 2017) on the limits of research that uses individualised methodologies to investigate responses to climate change.

5. Conclusion

Emotional engagement with climate change has been identified as an important area of research. This study found that parents were highly emotionally invested in climate change impacts and mitigation. The parental lens of risk evoked feelings of fear, grief, and guilt, which were often catalysed by recent high-profile climate-related events and discourses. These painful emotions were managed by activist and parenting practices which fostered countering emotions of hope and solidarity. This insight adds to research which has identified that personal and familial risk narratives can be important in climate change communication that seeks to mobilise the public (van der Linden et al., 2015), as well suggestions of making climate change "come home" by tapping into a "common self-interest" of emotional attachments to people and places that may lead to the support of adaptation policies (Moser, 2013, p. 11). It also suggests that potential climate action paralysis can be overcome through hope for the future fostered not by climate scientific discourse, but from strong personal relationships with family, friends, colleagues, and fellow activists.

The study also uncovered ways in which climate-related emotions are entangled with family relations and practices in both positive and negative ways. Everyday life often necessitates emotional disengagement to enable activists to function within their roles as parents. This reiterates work that cautions against individualised understandings of

engagement with climate change. In addition, climate-related emotions have the power to impact the quality of family relationships, for example when partners supportively participate in sustainable family practices and take care of children when activists attend meetings, or in raising children to be compassionate and engaged in environmental issues. An apparent division in emotional labour appeared to both increase and diffuse intra-partnership discord, depending on the context. More research could delve into the emotional isolation parents feel within their relationships and how they negotiate this over time.

The interactions of activists in their social world are consequential for wider societal feeling norms of climate change. The lack of moral anger in participants' narratives suggests an injustice grievance is yet to surface in climate parents' rhetoric, an expression which could contribute to a framing of climate change as an issue of justice and human rights for children. As found in previous research on other realms of parent-led activism, injustice framing has succeeded in resonating with policymakers and the public. As we witness increasingly damaging climate impacts around the world, a continued lack of urgent, proportionate mitigation by governments could put children's future further into jeopardy and ignite public consciousness on intergenerational injustice. More research is needed to explore the temporal unfolding of the nascent parent movement, as it augments and possibly reorients from fear and guilt narratives towards the outrage of earlier environmental justice activism. In particular, a wider socioeconomic and ethnic range of perspectives than this sample recruited during the Covid-19 pandemic could advance an understanding of the role of class and race in affective responses to climate intergenerational injustice.

Echoing conclusions drawn from a study by [Howell and Allen \(2019\)](#), this sample of parents' primary concern of their children's future shows that issues of social justice can matter more to people than 'the environment', which has implications for how climate change is framed and communicated to the public at large. A final point is that the sample of parents in this study generally consisted of parents who had recently moved into activism; it would be fruitful to do more research with parents who have been engaged for a longer period, as well as to conduct longitudinal research to document any changes over time as activists become more experienced, and their children older. Importantly, future research should interview children to gain their accounts of responding to climate change in the family context, an epistemic scope outside the design of this PhD study. These investigations could uncover whether and how children join or rebel against the activism their parents are involved in.

Ethics

This project was subject to ethical review by the University of Edinburgh, and was approved (ID: 267778) prior to commencement.

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Declaration of competing interest

No potential conflicts of interest have been reported by the author.

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